

Permission to speak with real honesty?...

In recent times, when I've thought about the future of our church I've felt it to look pretty bleak.

-Chances are that when Simon moves on he will not be replaced

-If you take the surname Botto off the Sunday club register since we started this term it leaves two names. They are the children of our Sunday Club leader

-People appear to be drifting away. Covid has prompted people to re-evaluate how they spend their time and I myself found the thought of committing to Sunday mornings again a bit like hard work.

- We have an ageing congregation (myself included!) I joke that I love coming to St James' because I'm considered one of the youngsters!

- We have just one church warden as nobody felt willing/able to step up and help Roger

- Even before the pandemic; we struggled to get enough people to simply sit in with the Sunday club to make our ratios right.

St James in 20 years time could look very different.....

BUT being amongst you these last couple of weeks in the church building, attending standing committee meetings and even PCC(!) has been a source of encouragement. Seeing old friends, smiles on faces, receiving the warm welcome we give so well here and catching up with the church family has been good. We've had an answer to prayer in the appointment of Zoe as our Children & Family worker. Crucially too we have a strategy. At PCC on Tuesday Simon spoke about the bridges into the church family and fringe that exist. We do a lot of good stuff. Forest Edge, ReCreate, The Bazaar, Coffee mornings and much more. From each of these there are (or will be) opportunities to journey closer to playing an active part in the life of the church and growing in faith.

I say crucially we have a strategy... more crucially our reading this morning tells us that "WITH GOD ALL THINGS ARE POSSIBLE"

Let's look more at that reading as a whole shall we?

Jesus is gathered with his disciples. A rag tag team of fishermen, tax collectors and social outcasts. There are times when they remind me of a film I'm very fond of: Little Giants.

I suspect that not many if any of you will have heard of or seen it. It's a twee family film from the mid-nineties about a kids American football team being formed. The very best players from the town have been picked for the squad that season with the exception of Becki. She was left out because she was a girl. This prompts her dad to go and cobble together a team to compete in the league that year. The clip

we are about to watch is the recruitment drive that he goes on. Like Jesus with the disciples there are some unconventional picks made.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DstAX2vugxg>

Now not long after the recruitment drive a new boy moves to town. He's called Spike. He has muscles popping out of his sports kit, a tunnel vision to succeed and has been bred for football by his dad who talks of rubbing evaporated milk into Spike's thighs every night before he goes to sleep.

The next day at training Spike shows up and the jaws of the little giants drop to the floor.

I wonder if it was like that for the disciples when the man showed up in this morning's reading.

Here are this eclectic mix of folk who society would have struggled to get their head around leading a movement of the Messiah and then enter stage left a man who in Matthew's account of that story we hear is a ruler. A young, wealthy, powerful leader who whilst it doesn't state it I imagine him to have great teeth, hair and be dashing good looking. He has followed the laws to a tee.

How might of the disciples been feeling in this moment? On Paper he was grade A disciple material. Excited? Threatened? Inadequate?

Well if their jaws dropped upon his arrival they dropped further still when Jesus pauses, looks at the man and tells him he loves him (there's no castigating going on here) but that something is missing!!

There follows the camel through the eye of the needle stuff and it's easy at this point to get caught up in money but I'm not convinced the issue is money per say. I don't think it's about who is rich or who is not rich but more about what or WHO you put your trust in.

Is your confidence and self-worth grounded in the good works you are doing? Your popularity with others? Your wealth?... or..... are you trusting in God over anything else to the point where you can give up the things that are comfortable and familiar and follow him. That is what he calls the ruler to do.

Twice in the reading today we hear about the Kingdom of God. It's mentioned again plenty in the bible. What though is the Kingdom of God? We tend to default to the stuff about eternal life, heaven, life after death. In Luke 17: 20-21 it reads

"The Kingdom of God isn't ushered in with visible signs. You won't be able to say that it's begun in this place or there in that part of the country. For the Kingdom of God is within you"

The Kingdom of God is present when we align with his will. The rich man wasn't up for letting go of the lifestyle he had and just put his trust in God.

I wonder what might be holding you back from that Kingdom of God this morning. It might be your love of money. That could be mixed up in there somewhere. More than likely though there is something that you need to give over to God. I know I tend to talk about my work at the football club but that actually is only a few hours a week. My day job is managing a team of 18 people at a local distribution company. Each month I put aside an hour to sit down over a coffee with each individual and check in with them.

What starts with work chat nearly always turns to struggles they are facing in their personal lives. I'm making the point here that we all have "stuff" going on and all too often we try and face it in our own strength. Maybe we can take a moment to mull that over in the peace and quiet of church...

So can I widen this back out and bring it back to St James?

Next week we re-launch Messy Church and have taken the bold step of moving every third Sunday service down to the village hall. A "neutral" venue in the centre of the village with cooked breakfast on offer. This is very much part of the bridge and steps strategy that Simon talked about at PCC. We believe that God is asking us to occasionally forsake what we find comfortable here (pews, organ, the routine of it all) and meet with those that aren't coming through our doors here just now in a way that we don't worship just now. When I say US I don't just mean the likes of Simon or Zoe or me. God hasn't provided us with a load of "Spikes." In this context I guess they'd be shiny young happening things with their own Youtube accounts and the ability to sell God like hot cakes.

He has gone with us! He has opted for this bunch of perhaps unconventional picks. Just like those disciples and just like the American football team. On our website it says that we are "A small church with a big heart." A congregation of Little Giants! WE are called as a church and I'd encourage you to join us next Sunday. The disciples towards the end of our reading earlier talked of sacrificing their homes and leaving their families to follow Jesus. Here we are being asked to swap the spot in the pew we are so accustomed to once a month for a chair in the hall. From custard creams to a full English.

I wonder what your favourite part of the service is here on a Sunday. It won't surprise you to learn that for me it's not the Peace. No, for me it is that moment when the door latch is audibly opened and the children from Sunday club flow in for their blessing at communion. In that moment we are complete as a church family in one place. Generations coming together. Those stepping out on their spiritual journey alongside those vastly experienced. There's real power in that! And so it's my dream that this can be the case for an hour or so once a month in the village hall. I hope you'll really reflect upon giving joining up a go. It would be easy to see the third Sunday as one you'll have off from here on in or one you'll get up earlier for and head to 8 'O Clock but my hope is you'll adopt Messy Church as a part of your spiritual life and your journey to becoming ever closer to that Kingdom of God!

Oh and the Little Giants!... Spike turned out to be a bit of a wrong'n and quickly fled to the other team in town. But they rose to the challenge without him and were victorious! I think we at St James will be too after all because WITH GOD ALL THINGS ARE POSSIBLE.

Amen